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Suzanne Bray

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“Am I my Brother’s Keeper?” or “The Kingdom of Hell is Within Us”: A Spiritual Haunting in Charles Williams’ “Et in Sempiternum Pereant”

Suzanne Bray

1 Charles Williams (1883-1945) wrote only one short story, “*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*” (1935), which, in English, is a curse meaning “And May They Perish Everlastingly.” It recounts the retired Lord Arglay’s mysterious encounter with an “emaciated, self-consuming grotesque” (Boyer and Zahorski 166) in a haunted house where time stands still. As Charles Franklyn Beach has accurately noted, readers are frequently “puzzled about what actually takes place” (459) in the house. Although the story became well-known on account of its inclusion in *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (1986), several critics deny that the emaciated figure which haunts the protagonist actually is a ghost, but they do not agree as to what it represents. Even the most eminent Williams scholars disagree about what happens in the final two paragraphs of the story and one expert, Professor Glen Cavaliero, has publicly changed his mind on the issue.

2 In order to resolve these questions, it is essential to see “*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*” in the context of Williams’ other writings and of the works he cites in the story. It is both a postscript to Williams’ second published novel *Many Dimensions* (1931) and also a theological tale where the fear comes from the possibility of eternal damnation, the haunting from the reality of persistent hatred in the protagonist’s soul, and the horror from the realization that hell may be within us as well as just around the corner.

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3 Charles Williams is not very well-known nowadays, but during his lifetime had quite a reputation as a writer of poetry, fiction, theology, literary criticism and biography. His most popular works were his seven "spiritual thrillers" (Watkins 234), stories of supernatural invasions into the everyday world. T.S. Eliot particularly admired these and the way Williams combined elements of fantasy with tales of "quite ordinary human beings, with their struggles among the shadows, their weaknesses and self-deceptions, their occasional moments of understanding" (xvii). Williams' sole short story strongly resembles these novels in theme and style. Although "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" was originally published in *The London Mercury* in December 1935, very little was written about it until it appeared in two collections in the 1980s: Robert Boyer and Kenneth Zahorski's *Visions of Wonder: An Anthology of Christian Fantasy* (1981) and Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert's *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories*. While Glen Cavaliero considers that it differs "in style and content from most of its companions" ("Novels of Charles Williams") in the Cox and Gilbert's collection, the action actually takes place in one of their ideal locations for a ghost story, somewhere "gloomy and isolated: in ruinous or long-empty houses, on lonely roads" (xv), and to this extent Williams' haunted house may be considered as almost stereotypical in its setting. Equally, Williams' tale fits many of the criteria identified by M. R. James in his introduction to V.H. Collins' anthology as "valuable in the concocting of a ghost story." It has "a definite time and place and [...] plenty of clear-cut and matter-of-fact detail." The protagonist's desire to both catch a bus and not be late for his appointment gives a somewhat prosaic credibility to the action. It has "atmosphere and a nicely managed crescendo," with a satisfyingly scary climax. It could also, as James recommended in the introduction to one of his own collections, easily cause the reader to say to himself: "If I'm not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!" At the same time, "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" corresponds to Dorothy L. Sayers' descriptions of the successful ghost or horror story in the post-Freudian world, found in the introductions to her famous anthologies. It thrives on "uneasy emotions" ("Third Omnibus," 1), it explores "the lonely horror of the dark places of the soul" ("Great Stories," 45) and makes the reader realize that "the kingdom of hell is," potentially at least, "within us" ("Third Omnibus," 7) and not only in the evil world outside us.

4 And yet, critics disagree about the nature of the setting, the identity of the haunting agent and about what actually happens at the end of the story. For Boyer and Zahorski, it is above all a fictional rewriting of "Canto 34, the conclusion of Dante's *Inferno*" (165) and the action takes place in "hell in an isolated country house" (166). Glen Cavaliero, the first critic to write about the story in any detail, saw the action as taking place not in hell itself, but at "an opening onto the Pit [of Hell]," which is also "a place from which ascent is made into heaven" ("Poet of Theology," 78). At this point, in 1983, he supposed the emaciated figure to be "a lost soul hastening to its own destruction" (78), and concluded that, in the final paragraphs, Lord Arglay "intercedes for it and saves it" (78).

5 Two scholars presented their view of the story in 1991. For Stuart Kenny, the emaciated creature is Arglay "himself in eternity. That self-consuming hate, burning in the fires of damnation" (44). Therefore, at the conclusion of the tale, Arglay saves himself and manages to escape from hell. For Charles Franklyn Beach, on the other hand, "Williams is not portraying hell in this story" (460), although he agrees that the gateway to hell is present in the abandoned house. Equally, Beach affirms categorically that "the

emaciated man is not a ghost [...] but is instead a man who repeatedly chooses self-love over courtesy" (463), and, as such, a living soul whose eternal destination is not yet fixed. He explicitly states that, in his opinion, "Glen Cavaliero incorrectly asserts that Arglay saves the emaciated man" (465).

6 However, by 1996, Cavaliero had changed his mind and come closer to Kenny's interpretation. In an article on Charles Williams and the art of the ghost story, he asserts that "the entire story happens not to Lord Arglay, but in him" ("Metaphysical Epiphany," 98). He therefore assumes that "the ghost does not invade this world; rather the consciousness of the this-worldly protagonist expands into the world of the spirit" (99). Cavaliero may, however, have changed his mind again, as in a 2001 article, he refers to the emaciated figure as "a troubled spirit on its way to hell." One final possibility is presented by Barbara Kowalik in 2010. She follows several of the other critics in concluding that "the lifeless house turns out to be the mouth of hell" (77), rather than hell itself, but provides an element of originality in her estimation that the emaciated figure represents the "materialized hate of [Arglay's] former brother-in-law" (77), who has recently died.

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7 In order to examine these theories, it is essential to look at Williams' other writings which may shed light on his short story. The most obvious place to start is his 1931 novel *Many Dimensions*, in which the protagonist of "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*," Lord Arglay, first appears. As Beach points out, "the allusion to the novel" in the shorter work "suggests that one might carry certain ideas about the character into the short story" (459). It is even possible to see it as a postscript to the longer work, tying up a spiritual loose end at the end of the novel. The first thing to note is that, in *Many Dimensions*, the previously agnostic lawyer, Christopher Arglay, and his secretary, Chloe Burnett, make the conscious decision to believe in God and "set [them]selves against the world, the flesh and the devil" (129). The short story indicates that Arglay has continued on this path. He reads "the Christian Schoolmen" (167), such as Abelard, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. He has developed a "habit of devotion" (172) and he prays. He deliberately resists temptation and refuses evil thoughts. However, it is clear in both works that he has to fight against one particular obstacle in his spiritual pilgrimage—his brother-in-law, the learned crook Sir Giles Tumulty, who remains nameless in the short story, although his identity is obvious for anyone who has already read the novel.

8 Williams makes it clear in both novels where Sir Giles appears (*Descent into Hell* and *Many Dimensions*) that he is a most unpleasant person and that those who dislike him, including Lord Arglay, have, humanly speaking, every excuse for their antipathy. Grevel Lindrop, Williams' most recent biographer, refers to Sir Giles as "utter cynical, magnificently foul-mouthed and totally devoid of human decency" (165). Arglay's first mention of his relative in *Many Dimensions* clearly indicates his opinion of the man: Sir Giles is "one of the most cantankerously crooked birds [Arglay] ha[s] ever known" and "the first authority in the world on certain subjects, and the first authority in hell on one or two more" (21). Sir Giles is clearly, for Arglay, both associated with hell and the powers of darkness and an impediment to belief in a benevolent deity. When Chloe first declares that she believes in God, the lawyer replies: "In spite of the fact that Giles

Tumulty exists, so do I" (130). Later on, when Arglay learns that someone is trying to harm Chloe, he immediately, and justifiably, suspects Sir Giles and goes on to contemplate murdering him (202). This temptation does not just go away, as several pages later Arglay is "still in two minds about going off to Ealing and quite simply killing Sir Giles" (210). Although he manages to resist these temptations, Arglay, at the end of the novel, still detests his brother-in-law and holds him at least partly responsible for Chloe's death. The fact that Sir Giles himself has also died seems to Arglay, and the reader, to be largely his own fault, as Sir Giles is portrayed throughout the novel as cruel, inconsiderate and short-tempered; his last recorded words, addressed to the sleeping, saintly Chloe, being "O go to hell" (244).

9 "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" appears to take place several months after the end of the novel. Lord Arglay has had time to publish the book he was in the process of finishing in *Many Dimensions*. All the loose ends from the longer work appear to have been tied up, except that Arglay's feelings for Sir Giles have not really changed. He knows that, during Sir Giles' lifetime, he came near to hating him, "hating with a fury of selfish rage and detestation" (171), and even though the man is now dead he still almost desires "to follow, to be with him, to provoke and torment him" (172). In his 1941 essay "The Way of Exchange," Charles Williams refers to the frequently experienced "feeling of outrage that we should be intimately interrelated, physically and spiritually, with those who have offended our pride or our principles" (153), which accurately describes Arglay's feelings about Sir Giles. However, Williams makes it clear that Christian doctrine carries with it an obligation to resist this feeling and to offer both service and solidarity to all "our friends and neighbours, whether we like our neighbours or not" (153). As he understands the relationships between God, each individual and all other people, living or dead, "pardon as a disposition of the soul is a necessity" ("Redeemed City," 109), however great the offence committed and however immoral the person concerned. Each person may, in the end, insist on remaining separate from the rest of humanity, but ultimately, for Williams, "this is hell" ("Way of Exchange," 154), or more precisely, such insistence on separation from other human souls will lead to the divine life in that person gradually dying and his drawing "nearer to the 'perishing everlastingly,' which will one day be hell" (154). The fact that Williams mentions here the concept of "perishing everlastingly," which was part of the title of his short story, indicates a connection between the messages of the two works.

10 In "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*," Lord Arglay appears to be aware that his feelings are unacceptable and contrary to the faith he professes. He therefore fights against them, committing himself to God until the temptation leaves him. And yet he remains aware that "his greedy loves and greedy hates [...] the cloud of the sin of his life" (175) are still there in his subconscious, ready to trip him up.

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11 Some clues as to what happens may also be found in the works to which Williams alludes in "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*": Dante's *Inferno*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible. The final quotation of the short story, "*E quindi uscimmo* [...] *a riveder le stele*"—We came forth to look once more upon the stars (Sayers, *Hell* 289)—from Canto XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*, gives one clue as to where to look for the imagery of hell used in Williams' tale. However, it is difficult to agree with Boyer and Zahorski that the story

"interprets fictionally Canto 34" (165) and that the self-consumption of the emaciated figure in the isolated house is to be equated with "the very pit of hell where Satan is devouring Judas, Brutus and Cassius" (166). This is particularly because Satan's cannibalistic devouring of the three great traitors is unlike Williams' unhappy creature's desperate gnawing away at his own flesh. A closer parallel may be found in Canto VIII where the Florentine Filippo Argenti is found in the Circle of the Wrathful having "turned on himself, biting with his teeth and mauling" (118), as an image of the eternal anger constantly consuming him. Dorothy L. Sayers' description of Dante's Wrathful as those who have, on account of their anger, "rejected pity and chosen cruelty" (120) in this world, certainly corresponds more closely to Lord Arglay's temptation with regard to his brother-in-law, or even to Sir Giles' own attitudes in life, than the ultimate treason of the traitors in Dante's final Canto. It may therefore be assumed that Lord Arglay, like Dante himself, has been offered a vision of hell which, as Sayers points out, "is remedial, is the soul's self-knowledge in all its evil potentialities—the revelation of the nature of impenitent sin" (*Hell* 68). The aim of this vision would be to lead Lord Arglay to repent once and for all of the hatred, anger and unforgiveness in his soul and reject them for ever.

12 References to *The Pilgrim's Progress* provide further enlightenment as to what is actually happening to Lord Arglay. As he approaches the house, the narrator explains that those who came this way carried their burdens on their shoulders (170), like Bunyan's pilgrims, implying that Lord Arglay may be carrying one too: the burden of his hatred. The house is also described as being tangentially off the narrow way Arglay had previously been walking on, as all the places of temptation in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are off the straight and narrow road to the Celestial City. However, the clearest parallel comes when Arglay, in the heat of his spiritual crisis, sees two doors and remembers that "from every gate of hell there was a way to heaven, yes, and in every way to heaven there was a gate to deeper hell" (176). This is a transparent allusion to the final paragraph of Bunyan's work where the narrator sees that "there was a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction" (133). Williams' more encouraging doubling of the door seems to indicate that Arglay, and the emaciated figure, are here faced with two possible destinations, even if, until this point, Arglay has been on the road to heaven and the ghostly figure on the road to hell. The lonely house would thus be a kind of ante-chamber, rather than hell itself. It is also worth noting that Bunyan's Christian, shortly before he enters the Celestial City is haunted by "apparitions of Hob-goblins and Evil Spirits" and is also "much in troublesome thoughts of the sins that he had committed, both since and before he had become to be a Pilgrim" (128). In Christian's case, as Hopeful explains, these are "sent to try you, whether you will call to mind that which heretofore you have received of [God's] goodness, and live upon him in your distresses" (129). Lord Arglay's reaction to the temptations which assail him is, in the first case, to commit himself to "the Omnipotence" (172) and, on the second occasion, to remember his own salvation, offer salvation to the emaciated figure, and then declare the glory of God. It is therefore possible to assume that Arglay, like Christian, is tried and passes the test.

13 Two verses in the New Testament also provide assistance in interpreting Williams' story. One of the most telling images in "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" is the smoke without fire coming out of the house's chimney, giving the impression that the laws of cause and effect somehow do not apply here. In two of his later works, Williams alludes

to the passage in the biblical book of *Revelation* where an angel declares to John that those who have worshipped the Beast and received his mark will be tormented with burning sulphur and that "the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever" (*Rev*. 14: 11). In *Descent into Hell*, the novel Williams was working on at the same time as he was writing his short story (Lindop 176-77), the author describes the wanderings of a man who has recently committed suicide and who makes his way through the places he had once known until the two heroines show him the way to salvation. The suicide imagines the disappointment of those who have persecuted him when they realise he is dead, and Williams compares this to the same verse in *Revelation* and John the Divine's vision of "where disappointed Hell is spread and smokes before the Lamb" (*Descent* 115). He would later evoke, more precisely, "the smoke of the torment going up for ever and ever before the Lamb and his angels" (*Forgiveness of Sins* 183) as something co-existing with the joy of heaven. The ever-rising smoke is thus a sign of hell and judgement, of unrepentant rebellion against the ways of God. However, the fact that, in *Descent into Hell*, Williams relates it to the fate of the recently dead suicide, who will avoid hell and find salvation after leaving this life, indicates that Williams thought this kind of second chance was possible. For this reason, it seems safe to conclude that the emaciated figure in the short story could be either alive or recently dead, and if dead, in Williams' world view, could still be saved in the place outside time.

14 The second Bible verse alluded to has to be assumed from Lord Arglay's crying out, "defying infinity, 'Now!'" (176), in order to save himself from the burning smoke and the hateful images of Sir Giles which are tormenting him. As Stuart Kenny observes, this is certainly a reference to "St Paul's statement about now being the day of salvation" (43) in 2 *Corinthians* 6:2. As time has stood still in the mysterious house, Lord Arglay has entered the timelessness of the eternal now and he has to react and consciously quit this mortal lethargy in order to experience a new beginning, where time can start again. Whether the day of salvation reached with his cry of "Now!" is just for Lord Arglay himself or also for the figure he aims to help is more difficult to discern.

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15 With these things in mind, it is now possible to examine the final paragraphs of "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" in order to try and work out what actually happens in the abandoned house. Lord Arglay, in the timeless state, has been confronted by the emaciated figure who tries to eat its own flesh. Arglay's first, horrified, reaction is to try and prevent it from doing so, but he does not succeed. However, as he gets close enough to the figure to touch it, he gets sucked into the heat and smoke, emerging from what appears to be the gateway to hell. In this stifling atmosphere, Arglay feels "the reality of his hate" (175) and sees "images of the man he hated swept in a thick cloud of burning smoke" (175). He is, at this point, only aware of the emaciated figure as "a wasted flicker of pallid movement" (175), like the background to a dream. Arglay himself feels "starving in the smoke" (175), like the figure. Refusing the evil around him, he cries out "Now!" and sees the two doors out of the smoke, presumably one to heaven and one to hell. Then, Arglay hesitates. The text says that "there was no sign of the phenomenon by which he had discerned the passage of that other spirit" (176). The use of the term "that other spirit," seems to indicate that the emaciated figure is not Arglay himself, but some other person, living or recently dead. This conclusion is

supported by the facts that Arglay moves his head "as if to seek his neighbour" (176), and that he believes this neighbour has "the nature of the lost" (176), having refused to learn from his mistakes and become so self-centred that his whole existence is centred in his "undying and perishing" (176), thus everlastingly perishing, self. Although there is, in the text, no clear indication of the identity of the figure, its presence brings to Lord Arglay's consciousness images of his hated brother-in-law. This, and the way the figure behaves, like one of Dante's Wrathful, full of anger and without pity, make it at least possible that it represents the deceased Sir Giles.

16 At this point, Lord Arglay, moved by compassion, desires "to offer himself" to the emaciated figure, "to make a ladder of himself" (176), whereby the figure could leave the road to hell and find the gateway to heaven. Similar acts of intercession are found in various places in Williams' fiction[1] and it is clear from all his writings that Williams believed such a transaction to be possible. Anne Ridler opines that Williams merely saw them as the logical outworking of the Christian doctrine of intercessory prayer, in which "by our own intention of good will we may make ourselves a channel for God's grace to flow towards another soul" (xlix). In any case, in the final sections of *The Descent of the Dove* (1939), often taken to be a description of the foundations of Williams' Order of the Co-inherence, the author refers to Christ's atoning death on the cross as "restoring substitution and co-inherence everywhere," with the result that "up and down the ladder of that great substitution all our lesser substitutions run" (147). Williams' use of the word co-inherence, usually used in theology to describe the relationship of complete solidarity between the persons of the Trinity, shows that he believes that a similar connection exists, or may potentially exist, between members of Christ's body, the Church. Even, in some circumstances, Williams shows co-inherence as possible for unbelievers who agree to form such a spiritual relationship with a believer.

17 After making his offer of help, of substitution, Arglay feels something come up behind him: "It leapt through him; he was seized in it and loosed from it. The torrent of its fiery passage struck the darkening hollow in the walls" (176). No more detail is given. No statement is made as to whether the intercession has been successful or not, whether the emaciated figure has been able to reach salvation by passing through the lawyer's body. The only clue may be found in the faint sound Arglay hears, "the weak wail of multitudes of the lost" (176). This sound may indicate that the figure has joined the lost in the pit of hell or, on the other hand, the lost souls may be moaning in disappointment that another soul has escaped them. The only similar sound to be found elsewhere in Williams' work occurs towards the end of *Descent into Hell*, where the Lilith figure tries to tempt the heroine, Pauline, into wanting the empty pleasures of hell. Pauline refuses and laughs with joy, at which a thin wail is heard, which Williams describes as "the wail of all those dead who cannot endure joy" (*Descent* 209). The lost, or "all the immortal who are sick for ever" (209), join in the plaintive wail, lamenting Pauline's joyful refusal, which undermines hell's influence on earth. This parallel makes it more likely that the lost in "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" are also wailing out of disappointment. In the short story, as soon as he hears the wail, Lord Arglay runs from the house declaring the glory of God, returns to the world of time and jumps on a bus.

18 In spite of the clearly theological implications of Williams' short story, it is not a fictional sermon. The author is showing a spiritual possibility and not preaching. As

T.S. Eliot explains, Williams' aim "is to make you partake of a kind of experience that he has had, rather than make you accept some dogmatic belief" (xiv). Reading "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" is therefore closer to reading a short story by Arthur Machen or Sheridan Le Fanu than one by the explicitly Christian G.K. Chesterton or George MacDonald.

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19 As Dorothy L. Sayers has pointed out, a ghost or horror story "must always leave us guessing" (*Third Omnibus* 5) and "plain unvarnished statement will not do, because the whole virtue of the story lies in the power of suggestion" (3). As indicated above, this is certainly true of Williams' sole short story. It is clear that the haunting occurs because Lord Arglay has allowed his feelings of hatred and unforgiveness towards his brother-in-law to remain in him, even after Sir Giles' death. Such a frightening encounter could therefore, presumably, happen to anyone who refuses to forgive, who insists on continuing to hate. For Glen Cavaliero, "not until it is over does the story have the power to frighten: it gains its effects through implication" ("Novels of Charles Williams"), the implication that it is scarily easy for any one of us to lay ourselves open to such a horrific experience. And yet, in spite of the doom-laden title, the uneasy atmosphere, which for some becomes "more eerie with each reading" ("Metaphysical Epiphany," 102), the slowly built-up climax and the horror of the self-consuming emaciated figure and the suffocating smoke, "*Et in Sempiternum Pereant*" may be read as a story of hope. Lord Arglay approaches the gate of hell, arguably saves, and certainly seeks to save, a lost soul, and then comes out of the experience "with some communion of peace at heart" (177), to look upon the stars. He has been tested and

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NOTES

1. Lester's substitution for Betty in *All Hallows' Eve* (1945) comes to mind, as does the Archdeacon's for Pattison in *War in Heaven* (1930).

ABSTRACTS

Charles Williams (1883-1945) n'a écrit qu'une nouvelle, « Et in Sempiternum Pereant » (1935), qui raconte la mystérieuse rencontre que fait le jeune retraité Lord Arglay dans une maison hantée hors du temps. Comme l'affirme Charles Franklyn Beach, les lecteurs de cette nouvelle ont souvent « du mal à comprendre exactement ce qui se passe » dans la maison. Même si la nouvelle est devenue très connue grâce à sa place dans l'*Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (1986), plusieurs critiques nient que le personnage décharné qui hante le protagoniste est réellement un fantôme. En revanche, ils ne sont pas du tout d'accord sur sa véritable identité. Même les experts les plus éminents de l'œuvre de Williams n'arrivent pas à s'accorder sur les événements des deux derniers paragraphes du récit et un universitaire a publiquement changé d'avis à ce sujet. Bien que tout le monde accepte que Williams ait subi l'influence de Dante et de Bunyan, la nature précise de sa dette envers eux reste floue. Afin de résoudre ces énigmes, il est essentiel de comprendre « Et in Sempiternum Pereant » à la fois comme un postscript au roman de suspens spirituel *Many Dimensions* (1931) et comme une conte théologique où l'ambiance de crainte vient de la possibilité de perdition éternelle, où la hantise est provoquée par la réalité d'une haine inassouvie et où l'horreur de la compréhension que le royaume de l'enfer n'est peut-être pas seulement à l'autre bout de la rue mais aussi en nous.

AUTHORS

SUZANNE BRAY

Suzanne Bray is professor of British Literature and Civilisation at Lille Catholic University in the north of France. She specialises in the history of religious ideas in 20th-century Britain and the interaction between theology, literature and popular culture. She has published extensively in English and French on C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton and several other bestselling Christian literary figures.